

*Aharei ha-Pe'ulot: If we follow our hearts, then what do our hearts follow?*¹

By: YONI GOLD

An observant Jew will notice that there are a considerable number of commandments. The *Sefer ha-Hinnukh*² observes that there seem to be an excessive number of *mitzvot* revolving around the Exodus and the Passover celebration. Do not be bothered by the quantity of paschal commandments, he insists, for there is a simple explanation. People are affected by their actions. Their thoughts and feelings are determined by the physical activities in which they take part. Therefore, a single commemorative command is not enough. For our redemption and divinely ordained position to be entrenched in our minds and hearts, we must act in accordance with those ideas. In this context, the *Hinnukh* coins the phrase “*aharei ha-pe'ulot nimsbakhim ha-levavot*” (the heart is drawn after the actions).

This principle of the *Hinnukh* may underlie the very nature of the Torah's commands. Rabbi Hananya ben Akashya (*Avot* 6:11 and *Makkot* 23b) explains that the vast array of *mitzvot* gives the people of Israel ample opportunity to accrue merit. We can see this idea in a new light after reading the *Hinnukh*. For the Jewish people to become a nation reflecting the ideals of God, they must always act in concordance with those ideals. The constant performance of *mitzvot* will draw their thoughts to God and their nation's divine mission, as well as to the specific principles which individual *mitzvot* manifest.³

Judaism is not only a religion of deed; it is a religion of the mind and heart. *Rahamana liba ba'i*—⁴ G-d desires our hearts. The recognition that our hearts are affected by our actions may also be the impetus for another statement of *Hazal*. The Talmud⁵ advises that a person perform *mitzvot*

¹ I would like to thank Dr. David Pelcovitz for reading an early version of this article and for his insightful observations.

² *Sefer ha-Hinnukh, mitzvab* 16.

³ See R. Yehezkel Levenstein, *Ohr Yehezkel*, Vol. 5: 268–269.

⁴ *Sanhedrin* 106b.

⁵ *Pesachim* 50b.

Yoni Gold is an educator in Skokie, IL. With degrees in Jewish Education and Industrial/Organizational Psychology, he brings the insights of psychology into the classroom and into his work with school administrations.

even when not fully committed to them, for “*mi-tokeb she-lo li-sbmah bah li-shma*” (if one acts without the proper intent, then one will come to act with the proper intent). That our actions will influence our minds appears to be a related belief. The *Hinnukh*’s tenet seems simple, and in line with *Hazal*’s view, but perhaps its apparent simplicity must be reevaluated.

Does every Jew who performs the myriad *mitzvot* every day, week, and year become imbued with the Torah’s values? Are all our Jewish day school attending children, after years of compulsory commitment, leaving with a heart fully committed to *mitzva* performance?

There is more to the *Hinnukh*’s rule than meets the eye. Although he may be correct that our thoughts and feelings are influenced by our actions, there must be additional factors to this principle.

Modern research has demonstrated that our thoughts are, in fact, affected by our actions. This interaction has been observed in the realm of attitude change, priming, abstract concept elicitation, and more. How do psychologists explain the influence that performance exerts? Further, if they acknowledge that such an interaction exists, can they tell us anything about the factors inhibiting or facilitating its effect?

First, we must identify the psychological mechanism(s) which explain(s) the effect. Next, we will delineate the different factors contributing to or limiting each mechanism’s realization. Finally, we discuss implications for Jewish education.

Psychological mechanisms

Psychologists have conducted numerous studies to tease out the root elements of this effect, and several theories have been proposed to explain its underlying psychological mechanisms:

- i. *Cognitive dissonance*: One of the longest standing theories is cognitive dissonance, suggested by Leon Festinger.⁶ According to the cognitive dissonance model, a person will always limit dissonant thoughts and knowledge. If a person holds a belief, but acts in opposition to this belief, then s/he faces contradictory facts. On one hand are the opinions, but on the other hand is the knowledge that s/he has acted counter to those attitudes. This results in psychological stress, which a person must address. The balance of consonant and dissonant elements will determine what course of action is taken

⁶ For an early study and enumeration of this theory, see Leon Festinger and James M. Carlsmith, “Cognitive consequences of forced compliance,” *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 58:2 (1959): 203–210.